



# The Death of Texas German: a Whodunit

## An Application For The Classroom

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### Abstract

The German language has deep roots in Texas. Starting in the 1840s a large immigration began from mid-western Germany and grew fast. Since then there have been many influences, like contact native English speakers and educational language mandates, which have helped develop, define and then later on cause the demise of these Texas German dialect language islands. In our poster we will outline the origin and history of German immigration into Texas, the influences that contributed to the language, and its impending death with the accompanying causes.

This poster also provides suggestions for teachers to introduce the topic in their classroom and to lead discussions and activities to familiarize students with the subject matter, including introducing teachers to resources available for classroom activities.

### Why Texas?

Friedrich Diercks, better known in Texas by the name Johann Friedrich Ernst, a German gardener from Oldenburg moved to America with the intent of ending up in Missouri, but because of rumors of land grants available in what is now Austin County Texas, he ended up there (Texas) instead. He wrote home to Germany about his 4000 acre land grant and how much potential the land had, and inspired many people to come from North Western Germany to Texas. Associations like the Adelsverein were responsible for thousands of Germans immigrating through the Port of Galveston to Texas, hoping for fertile land and prosperous future, creating what was called the German Belt. Beginning around 1844 these immigrants settled southeast and central Texas and named towns like New Braunfels, Schulenburg, Shiner, and Fredericksburg.

By the 1860s more than 20,000 German born immigrants included in a total of over 30,000 Germans, including American born ones, were counted among the Texas Germans (Jordan, 2010).

### Economic factors which contributed to TxG

Many economic reasons spurred the efforts of the Adelsverein to advance the immigrations of Germans into Texas. Germany experienced many factors, like overpopulation, infertile lands and famines which also led to unemployment poverty and hunger, all of which contributed to this desire for many Germans to lead an exodus to America. For example in the Upper-Rhine region where the Alsatian immigrants originated, the population greatly increased from about 270,000 people to 470,000 people from the late 1700s to the mid 1800s. This affected the land availability as well showing a decrease in land inheritance. Most farmers only owned about 12 acres of land, hardly enough to thrive off of (Roesch, 2012).

### Language Contact

Boas (2009) tells us that *Sprachinseln*, or language islands, are isolated areas of linguistic and cultural influence where a group speaking a certain language moves to an area surrounded by speakers of other languages. These *Sprachinseln* then “form a speech community whose members share certain linguistic repertoires and rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech that differ from those of surrounding speakers.” Even though English had become the language of trade in Texas after gaining independence from Mexico, there will still many Spanish speakers remaining in Texas. These languages were the surrounding influences for the Texas German.

### Education and Other Instruction

Upon settling in Texas, many Texas Germans established German speaking schools, German language newspapers, and even held church in German in order to preserve their language and culture. In 1905 there was a law passed in Texas that required teachers in free public schools to teach in recitations and exercises exclusively. All English German was not intended was to be treated not as a language of study and instruction. Further laws German in schools, German speakers to keep



and more school and business language required the use of English. German newspapers even stopped printing (Jordan, 2010)

### Social Political

During the 1830s, the letters written back to what is now Germany by Diercks, influenced many of the “petty noblemen” to organize groups like the Adelsverein. These noblemen hoped that through projects like the Adelsverein they could help settle Texas and gain wealth and power, using their current political places as a springboard into more power in America, as well as helping to alleviate the overpopulation in Germany. Efforts like these helped German immigrants find their way to places like Galveston, Houston and San Antonio as well as rural areas such as the “Texas Hill Country” and even founded new towns like New Braunfels and Fredericksburg (Jordan, 2010).

### Features

Texas German is spoken today by the descendants of the Germans who came the 1840s. What makes Texas German so unique are the changes that took place over time that distinguish it from the spoken German in Europe.

#### I. Pronunciation

Over time German speakers in Texas started de-ranking their vowels.

- ueber → iber
- oel → el

(USA & Canada breaking news, 2013).

Depending on the various dialects from the original German descendants, de-ranking was different from city to city. De-ranking examples is found from Texas German speakers in New Braunfels

TABLE 4.2  
Distribution of Rounded and Unrounded Front Vowels among New Braunfels Area Residents (Gilbert 1972)

| Map | Word/Phrase                       | Rounded | Unrounded | Other               |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|
| 17  | die Tür 'the door'                | 14 [ɨ]  | 1 [i]/[e] |                     |
| 18  | zwei Töchter 'two daughters'      | 1 [a]   | 12 [e]    |                     |
| 19  | Süßkartoffeln 'sweet potatoes'    |         | 15 [e]    |                     |
| 20  | zwei Kochtöpfe 'two cooking pots' |         | 15 [e]    |                     |
| 21  | eine Haarbürste 'a hairbrush'     |         | 13 [i:]   | 1 [e:()], 1 [i]/[u] |
| 68  | zwei Kühe 'two cows'              |         | 15 [i]    |                     |
| 71  | zwei Köpfe 'two heads'            | 1 [a]   | 14 [e]    |                     |

Map data from [www.bing.com/maps](https://www.bing.com/maps) and Google Maps



#### III. Borrowing from English

A very obvious change that occurred throughout was the borrowing of English words into German. Many words were newly created or partially borrowed. Lexical borrowing is used more and more heavily

|                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. Ich habe mich behaved. | b. Ich habe mich bekommen. |
| 'I behaved myself.'       | 'I have myself behaved.'   |

(Boas, 2002).

#### IV. Syntactic Change

Over time the loss of case became more apparent, the German dative case started to be used as if it were the accusative case, creating the “Akkudativ”, and the genitive case became lost. Different cases were also used where they do not belong. In the example we can see the Akkudativ

| Texas German  | Standard German   |
|---|---|
| (4) a. Helf mich!<br>Help me.ACC<br>'Help me!'                            | b. Hilf mir!<br>Help me.DAT<br>'Help me!'                               |
| (5) a. wegen dem Tisch<br>because the table.ACC<br>'because of the table' | b. wegen des Tisches<br>because the table.GEN<br>'because of the table' |

(Boas, 2002).

Here we see that the [r] has become more like the American r and that the German letter z [ts], has been pronounced as the American voiceless [s] (Boas, 2002).

#### II. Morphology/ Lexicon

Another crucial change that took place was that morphemes would be added to borrowed words from English and be treated as if they belonged to a German paradigm. The use of the past tense morpheme [ge-] is one example of change

- a. “Die Kuh ist über die fence *gejump*!”  
The cow jumped over the fence
- (USA & Canada breaking news, 2013).

Along with changes for tenses, plural endings were treated as if they belonged to a American paradigm by assigning the suffix [-s] or no suffix would be added. (Boas, 2002).

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| a. das Kind<br>the child<br>'the child' | b. die Kinder-s<br>the child-pl<br>'the children' | c. die Kinder-ø<br>the child-pl<br>'the children' |
|---|---|---|

### Dialect Example Cont.

Karen Roesch (2012) identifies Texas Alsatian as a distinct dialect of Texas German. This dialect is mostly used in the eastern areas of Medina County, Texas as well as within the limits of Castroville, Texas. She identifies this dialect as “endangered” because it “appears to be a language undergoing death with minimal change.” She identifies certain parts of the dialect which distinguish it from other Texas German (TxG) dialects, Standard German (SG) and even European Alsatian (ALS). For example, Roesch notes examples of how Texas Alsatian is differentiated in its Lexicon from the work of Nissle, using such words as “Inega (‘to look’) versus SG/TxG *sehen* or *gucken*, and *käija* (‘to fall’) (Nissle, 2008) versus SG/TxG *fallen*.”

Texas Alsatian versus Texas German and Standard German shows some interesting lexical differences

- (3.1) ALS lexical items Inega and käija in Gilbert’s (1972) Map 81 Gilbert: “Look how that tree is falling down!”  
SG: Sich, wie der Baum umfällt!  
ALS: *Liag, wie satte(r) Baum abwärts!*

Here we see how the abovementioned words used in Texas Alsatian are used as distinct lexical items (Roesch 2012).

Texas Alsatian as well as Texas German borrow heavily from English, as English is the more dominant language. Such borrowing from a more dominant language like English is one of the reasons that this dialect is dying out. Below is an example of a few English words being borrowed into the Texas Alsatian dialect.

- (3.5) #254  
Die die pickup rack a oder an d’ der rack kaputt. Ich bin am steering wheel vorange...  
'the pickup is on its side and the tire is ruined. And I wasn't thrown out, I was wrapped around the steering wheel...'

(Roesch 2012).

Texas Alsatian also shows several morphosyntactic distinctions as outlined by Roesch (2012). For example use of an indirect and circumlocutory form with the accusative or dative cases are used to help establish relationships between nouns as seen below

- (5.4) a. Texas Alsatian: #234  
Was isch seinem Kind si mal... malam?  
what is his/DAZ child his.NOM/ACC name  
'What is his child's name?'
- b. Texas German: I-82-1-10-a-eaf  
auch mit dem seine Schwestern?  
also with him.ACC his sisters  
'also with his sisters.'

Instead of saying was ist der Name seines Kindes or wie heißt sein Kind, this Texas Alsatian speaker spoke in an indirect form to say the same thing. Likewise the Texas German speaker said auch mit den seine Schwestern instead of something more simple.

One of the phonological features that help distinguish Texas Alsatian from TxG is the spirantization of the intervocalic [b] in SG. This is shown in the example below

- (4.0) Spirantization in Texas Alsatian [G] intervocalic [b]:  
a. #238: Sie hat keine ihre Nimm schreibe, der die ich alle.  
IPA: [s] hat keine ihre [s]imm schreibe, der die ich alle.  
SG: Sie hat keine Nimm schreibe schreibe, aber das ist alle.  
'We could write her name, but that is all.'
- b. #240: Es kam die hat drei jung Inega kilt, an mir ein gänge erwilt.  
IPA: [s] kam die hat drei jaung [s]igiljo kilt: an mir ein gänge erwilt.  
SG: Es kam die hat drei jaung [s]igiljo kilt, und wir sind überall [s]igiljo.  
'My family had three young boys, and we were everywhere.'
- c. #248: Wir haben die gleiche Nimm schreibe, aber das ist die.  
IPA: [s]ir ha:ben die [s]igiljo [s]igiljo, aber das ist die [s]igiljo.  
SG: Mein Vater ist geschwiele wo [s]illich ich selch laibre all geschwiele.  
'my father died when I was six years old.'

(Roesch, 2012).

### Teacher Application

Using the Texas German Dialect Project Archive, Teachers can engage their students in the learning process by playing different clips for their students showing various recordings of Texas German Speakers. Below we illustrate how to use the archive in your classroom.

Teachers will have students listen to examples from the Archive of the Texas German Dialect Project Website. The students will attempt to write what they hear, translate the words and phrases into English as well as writing down the correct Standard German equivalent. The Teacher will then lead a discussion with the students on how Texas German differs from Standard German.

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